**Downtown Revitalization**

Smart Growth revitalizes existing communities and preserves undeveloped land by directing development to established downtowns. Opting for in-fill development and redevelopment of "used" buildings and land relieves pressure for new development on "green fields" – undeveloped land.

In-fill development places new homes, commercial/retail development and public facilities in built communities, in structures and on land that is abandoned or underutilized.

Re-development restores existing properties and buildings that are in poor condition or underutilized, repairing existing structures or adapting them to new uses. It includes "Brownfield's" redevelopment and historic preservation.

*Case examples*

- In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, old warehouses and commercial buildings along a mile and a half-long stretch of the city's waterfront were converted to apartments and condominiums. Named The River Walk, the redevelopment opened the waterfront to pedestrians, provided an attractive public space and boosted property values. (For more information, go to http://www.cnu.org)

- In Baltimore, Maryland, the 577-unit Lafayette Courts high-rise public housing project was redeveloped as part of HUD's HOPE VI program. Now known as Pleasant View Gardens, the 21-acre human scale community features mixed-income town-homes and apartments, with day care, recreation, community service and health care facilities, and a community green. (For more information, go to http://www.hud.gov)

- In a built-up Virginia suburb 20 minutes from downtown Washington, D.C., a blighted neighborhood of severely dilapidated single-family bungalows was re-developed to create Madison Place, a 125-unit townhouse community. (For more information, go to: http://www.nahb.com)

- In Winter Park, Florida, a failed mall was redeveloped, its parking lot reconfigured into a network of streets and blocks, with housing in a former department store, a movie theatre, shops and restaurants. (For more information, go to http://www.doverkohl.com)

# Creating Places

High quality pocket parks provide opportunities for contemplation and quiet interludes in the heart of higher density areas. Dense plantings and water features are very effective in blocking out background noise. Durable, high quality materials add dignity and longevity.

The most important task of design is to facilitate the creation of places, that is spatially defined entities with a recognizable identity and a distinct character. Places are the physical foundation of community. Places can be predominantly built or left mostly in a naturalized state; they can have an urban, suburban or rural flavor; they can be sophisticated and expensive or simple and functional; but the ways in which the natural and man-made elements are combined always give places a distinct personality. Places are not synonymous with models of land development, such as "planned unit development" or "golf course community," although these too can become places. On the other hand, the generic, indistinct landscapes generally associated with sprawl are rarely perceived as places.

Places are built of both standardized and individualized components. Examples of standardized components include highways, jughandles and overpasses; shopping centers; parking lots; utility lines; gas stations; and generic buildings, such as the "plain vanilla" office building, townhouse, post-office, trailer class-room and other examples of "chain-store" architecture. These off-the-shelf

components adhere to institutionally adopted standards or constitute corporate images with instant recognition and predictable product lines; often, both the building and the site plan are standardized, subject only to minor modifications in response to local conditions (soils, drainage). Standardized components are functional, economical and predictable.

Individualized components, on the other hand, are conceived for the occasion, tailor-made. They are likely to use indigenous plants and materials and are often better adapted to local conditions. They offer testimony to individual expression and local ingenuity. They are often inspired by elements of local vernacular — a community or region's native architectural language — and can respond to site constraints and local conditions in interesting and unexpected ways, because they are not bound to a pre-existing program or model. Individualized components are the very building blocks of place.

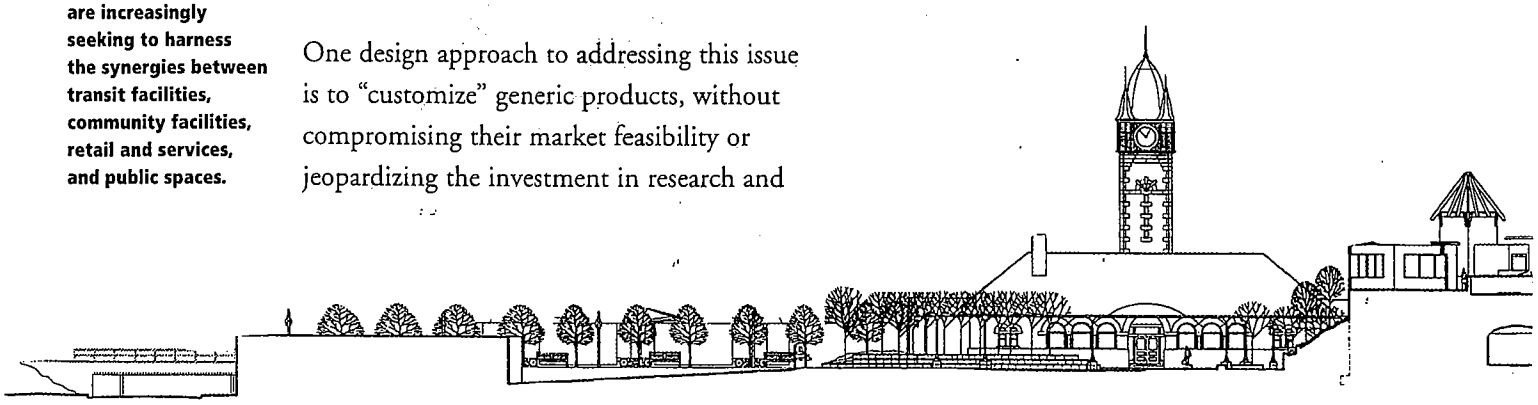
Placemaking in the late 20th century involves a delicate balance between standardized and individualized components. Standardized components are inexpensive and easily accessible, but if assembled indiscriminately they do not create a place, just a group of generic components. Individualized components can be more expensive and time-consuming, but are likely to be rich with diversity, life and character.

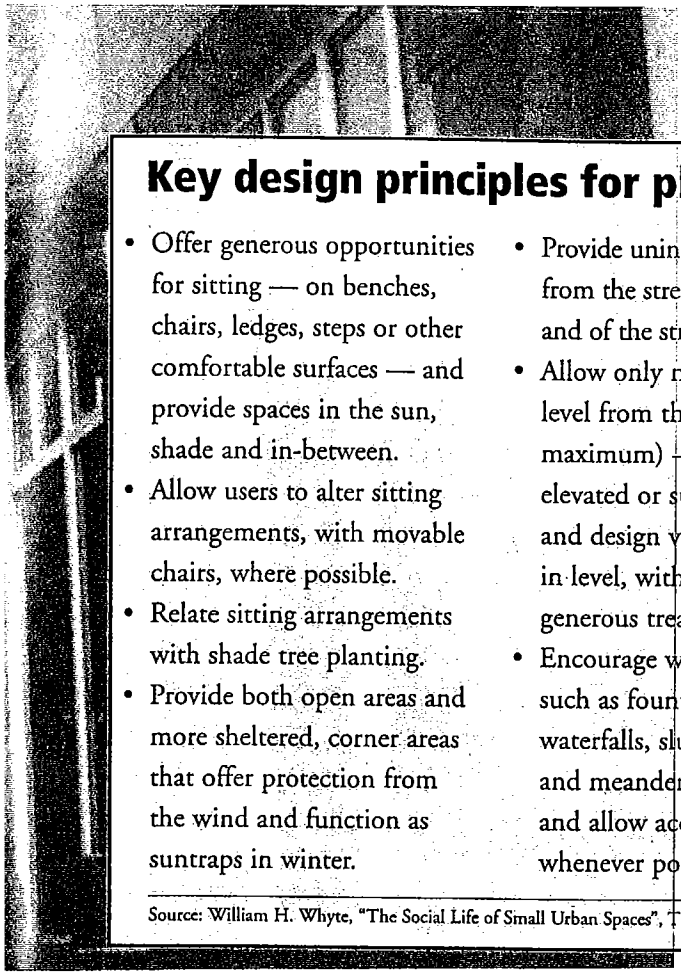
One design approach to addressing this issue is to "customize" generic products, without compromising their market feasibility or jeopardizing the investment in research and development that goes into creating a template. Customizing can take two tracks. One track is to adapt a generic site plan to real world surroundings in a sensitive way—to make it fit into a preexisting street pattern without bursting the seams. This may involve changing the parking, stormwater detention, location of driveways and/or other site elements. Where the generic site plan is likely to be auto-oriented, the customized site plan might be pedestrian-oriented. This is particularly relevant when attempting to place suburban templates (for example, a drug store or supermarket) into the type of physical fabric of streets and blocks found in older, traditional communities.

The other track is simply to "dress the box," that is to combine a standardized floorplan, for example, for a post office or supermarket, with a customized facade and exterior treatment. Columns, cornices, rooflines, fenestration, colors, building materials and other such elements can easily transform a generic box and adapt it to its surroundings.

Adapting development templates to specific surroundings offers a compromise between the totally generic and the completely customized. With a little flexibility, one can fit contemporary floorplates (building footprints) into traditional street and block patterns; and create buildings which combine state-of-the-art floorplans with shells that are responsive to area architectural design guidelines. Taming and customizing generic products is a critical design task at the local level and an important subject to be addressed by local design guidelines.

**The plan for Sojourner's Place envisions a quality public space for pedestrians and transit patrons adjacent to the new train station in Elizabeth. Community revitalization efforts are increasingly seeking to harness the synergies between transit facilities, community facilities, retail and services, and public spaces.**





## Key design principles for plazas and other public spaces

- Offer generous opportunities for sitting — on benches, chairs, ledges, steps or other comfortable surfaces — and provide spaces in the sun, shade and in-between.
- Allow users to alter sitting arrangements, with movable chairs, where possible.
- Relate sitting arrangements with shade tree planting.
- Provide both open areas and more sheltered, corner areas that offer protection from the wind and function as suntraps in winter.
- Provide uninterrupted views from the street into the plaza, and of the street from the plaza.
- Allow only modest changes in level from the street (2 feet maximum) — prevent elevated or sunken plazas and design very gentle changes in level, with small risers and generous treads.
- Encourage water features — such as fountains, waterwalls, waterfalls, sluiceways, pools and meandering brooks — and allow access to the water whenever possible.
- Provide generous shade tree plantings, encourage canopies, but maintain accessibility to trees, avoiding fences and wires.
- Provide eating opportunities — through cafes, restaurants, snack-bars, vendors and kiosks — and allow them to expand to satisfy market demand.
- In commercial areas front active ground floor uses with articulated facades on plazas and other public spaces and avoid unarticulated dead walls or low traffic uses.

Source: William H. Whyte, "The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces", The Conservation Foundation 1980.

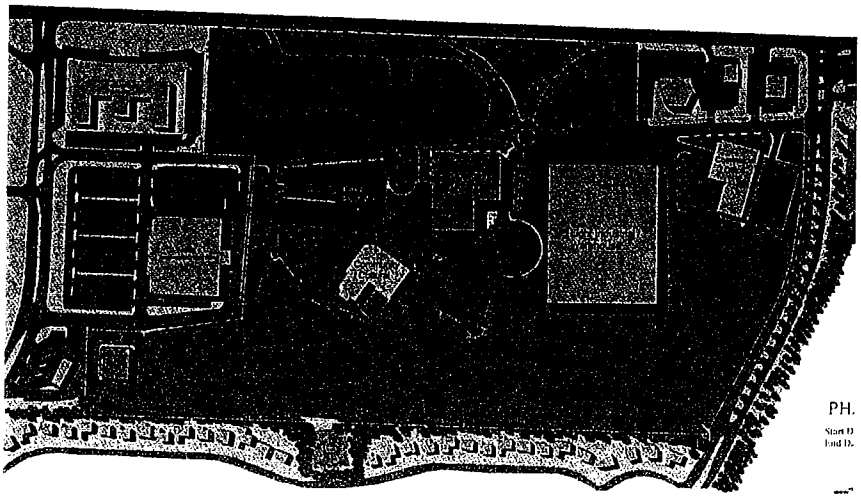
# Redesigning Commercial Areas

Sprawl redesign has focused mainly on commercial projects. The successful models to date have been driven primarily by either:

- the potential for a significant public investment in transit, such as a new light rail or commuter rail station; or
- the desire to create a town center within a suburban fabric where no center exists.

Redesign often involves site intensification and a more efficient use of the site. Given the high suburban parking requirements, parking lots are often prime targets for redevelopment. Many commercial parking lots are overdimensioned by contemporary standards. When commercial parking lots are redeveloped, excess surface parking is replaced by new buildings and public spaces. Surface parking may also be replaced by structured parking. Narrower streets with curbside parking can replace wide driveways and parking aisles. Parking needs may be reduced by shared parking conditions and greater reliance on alternate modes of transportation.

In New Jersey, the redesign of commercial areas has been explored mostly at the level of intentions. In Randolph Township, planning efforts to redevelop an aging shopping center on Route 10 with a more mixed-use town or village center have been on-going for almost a decade, with limited progress thus far. In West Milford, a demonstration study sponsored by the Regional Plan Association's New Jersey office used computer simulations to visually explore traditional alternatives to conventional shopping center development and to present these to residents and local officials in evocative, easy-to-understand graphics. Similar techniques were used in the Princeton Junction section of West Windsor by the Regional Planning Partnership (formerly MSM) to visually simulate the redevelopment opportunities around the existing commuter train station. Redesign of the Willingboro shopping center on Route 130 is the most promising experience to date. If successful, this project could provide an important model for public/private redevelopment of defunct commercial areas (see below).



WILLINGBORO TOWN CENTER

Proximity between jobs and housing is very desirable, yet inserting housing in auto-oriented commercial areas can be particularly challenging. Many commercial areas are quite consolidated and adding housing would in many cases require wholesale redevelopment; residential uses at such locations may not always be appropriate; housing may not be supported by the market; or it may only occur incrementally, over a long period of time.

Municipalities are encouraged to take proactive measures and examine opportunities to redesign auto-oriented commercial areas. Redesign opportunities should be identified through the master planning process, and discussed with neighbors, landowners, developers, tenants and property managers. Financially healthy areas are less likely candidates for redesign, but obsolete or failing areas may offer rewarding opportunities. New Jersey's redevelopment statutes create opportunities and provide the framework for municipally driven redevelopment efforts.

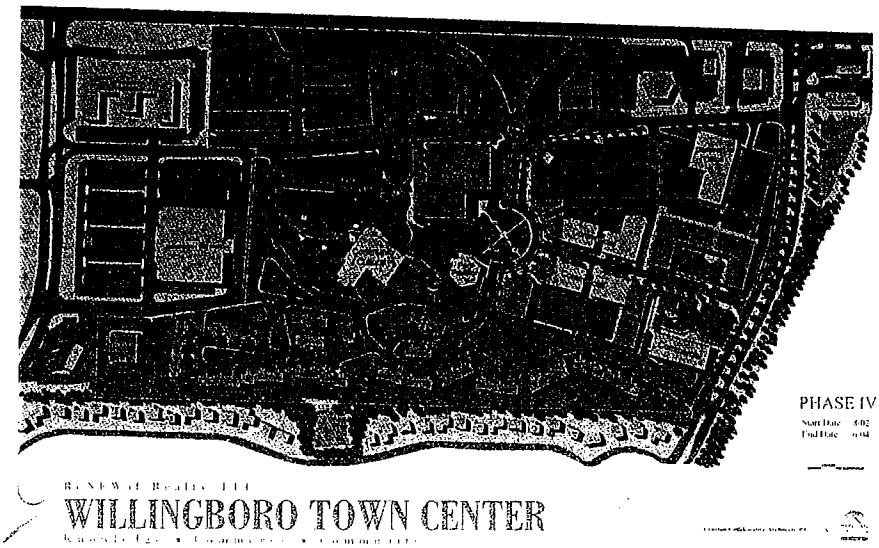
## When Is Market-Driven Redesign Likely?

Experience shows that redesign of commercial areas is most likely if:

- The physical plant is functionally obsolete and the property-owner or manager is facing significant capital investment.
- Market shifts have significantly depreciated the value of the physical plant.
- The real estate market is strong and there is demand for less conventional products.
- Redevelopment potential is enhanced by a significant investment in new or rehabilitated infrastructure, such as a new train station.
- There is a single owner or management entity, rather than multiple interests.
- There is community support for the redesign.
- There are significant public incentives assisting with clean-up, infrastructure, tax abatements.

## Site Intensification

Sprawl encourages underutilization of land. Artificially low density and floor area ratio requirements, excessive parking and open space requirements, stormwater detention, buffers and setbacks frequently result in very low levels of site utilization, even at build-out. Yet in a dynamic economy, the demand for land increases. Many uses have increased space needs which they would prefer to satisfy on-site, by expanding existing facilities. Communities can provide incentives for site intensification — through rezoning, transfer of development rights, lower parking and other requirements — as a way to encourage both site redesign and job retention. Site intensification also provides an excellent opportunity to upgrade landscaping, improve signage and generally enhance site appearance.




**Many post-war suburbs have undergone the same rounds of disinvestment suffered by older cities. Retail is particularly sensitive to changes in industry formats and patterns of consumer demand. The redevelopment of the 56-acre Willingboro Plaza is a partnership between public and private interests to create a new mixed-use town center from a dead shopping center, while humanizing a largely impervious landscape. It is anticipated that the new town center will have housing, office, industrial and retail in addition to civic uses and public open space.**